EDITORIAL: RADICAL THEOLOGIES — WHY PHILOSOPHERS CAN'T LEAVE CHRISTIANITY ALONE

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Christianity has been 'returning' to continental philosophy for some time now. At first it was the question of mystical theology which returned to haunt the continental philosophers' attempts to articulate the unbridgeable gap between words and things, the individual and the world.[1] More recently it is St Paul who has returned to the centre of these debates, increasingly celebrated as an icon of revolutionary politics.[2] This special edition of *Modern Theology* seeks to explore the complex relationship between contemporary continental philosophy and Christianity, tracing lines of connection between Christian theology, Christian practices, politics and philosophy.

What has become increasingly clear in recent debates over the interconnections between Christianity and continental philosophy is that, while questions of the role of Christian theology in continental philosophy may have returned recently to prominence, they never really went away. Western notions of 'the secular' are themselves deeply Christian, and the history of Western philosophical thought is more or less inseparable from the development of Christian theology. To talk about Christianity and continental philosophy, then, is always also to talk about the histories of Western culture, colonialism and racism; to talk about capitalism, democracy and resistance.

The question of religion in continental philosophy has never really been limited to the question of Christian theology, for all that Christianity tends to overdetermine these debates and, indeed, the category of religion as such. None of these debates and discussions would take the shape that they do if it were not for the long and ongoing histories of Christianity's encounters with its others – particularly Judaism and Islam. These encounters are in the background of many of these papers, if only obliquely. These discussions take place within and are inevitably shaped by the larger context of the 'return of religion' to global politics, in which understandings of Christianity are formed by and in reaction to conflicts between the West and the Middle East, between Israel and Palestine, between neoliberalism and its opponents.

This edition, however focuses on the question of Christian theology and its relationship to continental philosophy. All four essays suggest that the relationship between Christianity and philosophy is not simply a one-way process of philosophical borrowing from Christianity but a complex interplay of the ideas and practices of both philosophy and Christianity. Nor is this interplay entirely something to be celebrated: what is passed around in the interchanges of philosophy and Christianity is often ambiguous and complex. These papers expose some of the ways in which both philosophy and Christianity are multiple, contested and mobile.

Beverley Clack's 'On Returning to the Church: Practising Religion in a Neoliberal Age' is an essay by a continental philosopher who has found that she cannot leave Christianity alone. This article reflects on and develops her 1999 piece 'On Leaving the Church'. Having previously discussed her decision to leave the Church, because of its sexism and because of her desire to find forms of belief and practice that enable human flourishing, Clack speaks about her decision to return to the Church for the same reasons. Following a number of thinkers within continental philosophy of religion, Clack describes the ways in which she has found herself drawn back to alternative modes of engagement with religion. Where once the most effective protest against Christianity's institutional misogyny seemed to her to be the refusal to be part of its institutions, now the desire to confront and uproot that misogyny has led her back to work within and against the Church. Where once the rejection of doctrinal constraints seemed necessary to the practice of philosophy, now Clack finds within Christian communities an

1 Key texts include Taylor (1987), Horner (2001), Marion (1991), Derrida (1992a, 1992b), Ward (1995), Caputo (1997) and Caputo and Scanlon (1999).

2 See especially Žižek (2000), Badiou (2003), Taubes (2004), Agamben (2006), Caputo and Alcoff (2009), Milbank and Žižek (2009), Milbank, Žižek and Davis (2010), and Blanton and de Vries (2013).

openness to explore questions of depth and the quest for wisdom which is often absent from professional philosophy. Following Michelle Le Doeuff, Clack describes the potential value of the church as a space where it is possible to learn to make peace with unknowing and uncertainty, with the limits of human knowledge, in ways that challenge and unsettle the patriarchal desire for mastery. What Clack, as a philosopher, finds in Christianity is no simple salvation from the injustices of the world: Christianity is not monolithic and some of its expressions give rise to damaging forms of exclusivism, indifference to suffering, and injustice. And yet within a culture increasingly dominated by the values of neoliberalism, Clack says, she has come to find within certain Christian communities the space to explore alternative models of what is valuable and – crucially – resources for recognising and engaging with suffering.

Vincent Lloyd's 'Achille Mbembe as Black Theologian' explores the central importance of Christianity to the work of this Cameroonian thinker, whose work engages and critiques French continental philosophy from a post-colonial, African and Black perspective. Unlike French thinkers like Derrida, whose work enjoys great popularity amongst Christian theologians and philosophers of religion despite – and occasionally in disregard of – his professed ambivalence towards Christianity, Mbembe situates himself explicitly within the Christian theological tradition. At the heart of Mbembe's intellectual project, Lloyd argues, is the attempt to bring French theory – often understood as a deeply European, bourgeois body of work – to bear on the experiences of postcolonials, Africans and Blacks. If we want to know what it is to be human, we must start with the experiences of these oppressed peoples, not because they are sanctified by their suffering but because they, suffering at the hands of the existing order of things, are more easily able to see through it. Blessed are the poor, Lloyd suggests, not because poverty is beautiful but because those who do not possess wealth are less likely to be possessed by it. They are more able to recognise money, power and prestige as the false idols that they are. They are better placed to see that what makes us human is not our position within society but the fact that every individual human being is always more than their assigned social role. This, Lloyd argues, is the essence of Mbembe's Christianity, and it is because he sees postcolonial, African and Black contexts as privileged theological sites that he is not merely a theologian but, specifically, a Black theologian. For Lloyd, the fundamental challenge for Christian theology and practice today is the need to address the heresies of colonization and racialization; Mbembe's work offers us tools for this task.

For Katharine Sarah Moody the problem with contemporary Christianity is not the heretical deviations of colonization and racialization, but the persistence of belief in the transcendent God. Moody's article, 'The Death and Decay of God: Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity' explores the work of two figures who draw on contemporary continental philosophy as resources for radicalising emerging church thinking and practice about the existence of 'God'. Peter Rollins and Kester Brewin draw on the work of John Caputo and Slavoj Žižek, and consider the central problem for Christianity to be the persistence of belief in God. They seek to explore ways in which the death of God in modernity might be followed not by the triumphant resurrection of Christian theism but by God's decay. In Rollins' work this means that Christian communities should work together to hasten the decay of the persistent, often unconscious, belief in a transcendent God. For Brewin, new collectives of believers should come together as the audiences to a magic show, suspending their disbelief so as to receive the true meaning of Christianity: that there is no Father God, only the community of believers themselves, responding to a call to action that is present in the name 'God'. These emerging expressions of radical theology are not, Moody argues, denying certain conceptions of God so as to re-assert the existence of a God who escapes all human language. Nor are they a form of Christian imperialism, asserting that Christianity, of all the religions, gets closest to a properly radical insistence on the death and decay of God. Rather, these emerging forms of religious community seek to make space for exploring what it is to be faithful to the demand we encounter in the name 'God', and for responding as a community to that demand whilst taking upon ourselves the absolute responsibility that is possible only after God has not only died but disintegrated.

My essay, 'The Christian Legacy is Incomplete: For and Against Žižek' focuses on the work of Slavoj

Žižek. Žižek’s celebration of Christianity as a source of revolutionary political thought is, I argue, inextricable from his claim that only the European legacy offers us hope for overcoming capitalism. However, there are key antagonisms within Žižek’s own work which make it possible to read Žižek against himself. Žižek’s own work undermines his claim that *only* the Christian-European legacy makes radical politics possible. Žižek makes a double appeal both to St Paul and to Ancient Greece as the origins of radical politics. But these two sources are in fact distinct; the notion of a single European history running from the Ancient Greeks via Christianity to the Enlightenment is a powerful story, but one that owes more to fantasy than to historical fact. Žižek argues that every social order is structured around a fundamental antagonism, undermining his persistent assumption that *only* Christian-European society is able to transform itself through confronting its internal antagonisms. And he claims that only the internal contradictions of a society can prompt its transformation, yet discusses a number of cases in which the historical development of a society or a political movement is prompted by an encounter with another social order. I suggest, then, that rather than focusing on Žižek’s discussion of Christianity, Christians would do better to draw instead on Žižek’s ontology. In emphasising the incompleteness of everything that exists, Žižek articulates an understanding of love as a non-narcissistic way of relating to others which refuses to reduce the whole world to a supporting role in the drama of the life of a single individual or social order. He also gives an account of commitment to particular communities and traditions of thought not because they are the sole and universal hope for the world but simply because we cannot help but love them. Christianity might well, on this account, be a site of struggle offering the potential for radical love and politics, but it cannot be the only one.

These four accounts of the entanglement of Christianity and continental philosophy converge and diverge in a number of ways. For each, Christianity has a certain ambiguity: both part of the problem and offering resources for resistance and reinvention. For Clack, misogyny and the shallow and instrumentalised vision of human flourishing under neoliberalism is the problem. For all of its problems Christianity offers both a site for the struggle against misogyny and an exploration of a deeper understanding and embodiment of wisdom. For Lloyd, racialization and colonization are the primary sources of violence in the contemporary world. The Christianity of Black theology exposes the irreducibility of each human person to their status within this violent social order and offers the joy of struggle with and against this heretical vision of human value. For Moody, the problem is the Christian logic of resurrection which must be resisted so that God can be not only put to death but decomposed. The radical theology of Brewin and Rollins offers resources for communities to enact this burial so that they may take upon themselves the challenge of enacting the demand which takes place under the name ‘God’. For me, the problem is Christianity’s entanglement with the violently racist and colonizing European legacy. What Žižek’s materialist theology offers is both the resources for its own dismantling and an understanding of Christian love precisely as the demand that we resist the temptation of understanding Christianity as the only hope for the salvation of the world. In all of these texts the historical entanglement of the continental philosophical tradition and Christian theology and practice is such that the boundaries between the two are increasingly muddied. Clack describes her own experience of a continental philosopher who is also a Christian; Lloyd makes a case for reading Achille Mbembe as both continental philosopher and Black theologian; Moody describes Christian communities for whom continental philosophy is the crucial theological authority; I examine the entanglement of Christian supremacy and Eurocentrism in the work of Žižek, a continental philosopher who is also, as Moody describes, a theological resource for some Christian communities.

Together these articles open up a number of questions which are too often neglected or marginalised when considering the relationship between continental philosophy and Christian theology. What is the role of Christian practice in forming continental philosophical thinking about religion? How are both continental philosophy and Christianity complicit in the oppressive structures they seek to oppose? How ought we to handle the complexity and multiplicity of Christianity when considering its ongoing role in contemporary philosophy and politics? The revival of interest in Christian theology offers new possibilities and resources for Christian theologians; yet it is not, as becomes clear in these essays,

unambiguous.

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